Judd on Art and Architecture

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I read the following paper, now slightly improved, in the concrete auditorium of the Yale School of Art and Architecture on the twentieth of September 1983. It's a beginning to making some of my ideas communicative; as to the ideas, it's hard to know where the beginning is. Wittgenstein, who is by now too chic to quote but whom I will, said: "It is so difficult to find the beginning. Better said, it is difficult to begin at the beginning and not to try to go back further." While writing this paper I suspected, and now realize, that what I was writing about was the process of making art, rather than about first or last principles, which should come later in a more modest form than usual. The beginning and the substance of a discussion longer than this paper would be of the process of making art, which I think is neglected. The aestheticians are trying to draw conclusions from the process and its results, but to me the process is first and primary and, in a way, is the conclusion. The philosophers are proceeding inductively backwards to a priori conclusions. I would like to go forward from the end to the beginning of the process to a posteriori conclusions. Process is the beginning but the beginning always steps backwards so that rather than simply beginning, the beginning is a search for the beginning.

It's not irrelevant that as an artist I have an edge on the analysis of the process. A practitioner can always make a philosopher nervous. But after a few vague generalizations the philosopher becomes the practitioner and the edge is lost. Some of the ideas in this paper occurred to me before I began to study art and so are distinct from art and are more or less philosophical, such as the fallacy of the division between thought and feeling; some of the ideas have been confirmed in making art; some ideas are the result of making art, the result of the interaction between what is available to make a work exist and thought and feeling as one. The division between thought and feeling is part of course of the Christian one of body and soul, an itch to be elsewhere being easier to promote than scratching at home, But when my soul aches my head hurts, so I think body and soul are right here,

here and now. They are not going to leave one by one, but together for nowhere. I will consider some of the questions of art, not primarily from the outside, but as they occur in my work. An artist is certainly not without ideas and principles but these cannot be completely formulated beforehand, before the work is developed, and then simply embodied. It is an essential of art that the process of making it and the use of all that comprises it influences, suggests and enforces ideas and qualities. The ideas and qualities and the materials and techniques build each other. A red seems to have a particular quality of its own. In a work it retains that quality and yet it is altered and amplified by the con text. Its original quality may have suggested the alteration. The idea or quality desired may have required the red

[XB1] .

I've been making art for thirty-six years, even more if I count a watercolor done in Omaha at eleven. By now art is a natural activity. Many thoughts and feelings have become forgotten assumptions--later I'll consider the old division between thought and feeling. It's impossible to remember the many times that red and an idea have changed precedence. I can't remember all of the particular decisions which built a type of work. It's hard to recall all of the general ideas which guided those decisions. And then much is based upon natural predilections, some understood, some partly, some mysterious. A few were present at the beginning, but I usually didn't recognize their importance. The new qualities, your own, that were not in earlier art, at first are often not considered qualities of art. This natural confusion works perfectly well for me; it's life, and I like it. But while this produces art, a form of communication itself, this doesn't produce verbal communication. Decisions made in working result in art, not in discrete ideas. Problems are solved and the solutions settle quietly into assumptions. There are guiding ideas but these also coming to be very old and natural. Also they are not separate from the work and its process and so are not easily stated. The experience of someone else's work, which I'll mention later, is close to this same natural or normal state. The quality is understood first and directly and then some implications, in varying degrees. Some are not understood at all. If the art is old, much will never be understood. The many derivative artists and architects of the moment don't know that they can't begin to understand the forms they try to revive. The experience of knowing of a viewer is real, if narrow; the experience of knowledge of a user, if it occurs at all, is an illusion. Therefore, in order to discuss what I think or what another artist thinks, it is necessary to isolate and construct verbally communicative ideas. In fact, the more you can construct a

philosophy the better. But this is a great effort to make for my work, and even more to make for someone else's. I've never done this. A little article on John Chamberlain's work long ago is the nearest I've come to this effort. Such a construction, along with a judgment as to quality, would be art criticism. This present lecture is a fragmentary beginning to providing a little extroverted philosophy for myself.

Everyone agrees that ultimately one essential of art is unity. After that the agreement breaks down. This fact of unity doesn't seem to say much, which is an ancient characteristic of aesthetics, the most uncertain and least developed branch of philosophy and the most ignored by those it concerns, including myself until now. Barnett Newman told Susanne Langer that aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds. It's now a famous quip. Much of the reason for ignoring aesthetics is due to its neglect of the process of the overall development and the daily making of art. The conclusions of aesthetics are not relevant in the beginning, seldom concern the process, and say little afterwards. Also it's difficult to be informed by the extreme generalities of aesthetics when your problems are so specific. Visual art is learned primarily from other art, that of the past, more importantly the recent past and most importantly the present. For example, it's a useless platitude to tell someone that their work should be **unified**. If the person has any sense at all of what they're doing, their first work is unified, but at **a very low level**. That unity is one of similarities, of things easily joined, which produces a weak generality and next to no particularity, like a routine wash of watercolor. In fact the usual essentials of art are all platitudes and there is much art to prove that these essentials can both exist and be weak. It's more important to understand why a work is very good, especially now when quality is considered undemocratic and vague generality and trite derivation are considered thought and tolerance.

Twenty years ago I said, somewhat facetiously, that if someone said that their work was art, it was art. It's perhaps worthwhile to try to define art but it seems nearly impossible and fairly boring. Why a work of art is good, middling or bad is much more interesting. A judgment of quality is much more crucial. Many now make art and architecture, music and dance. These activities could be confined to their highest quality and everything left over relegated to not being art. But this isn't simple; much will still be called art. Certainly a lot of people make the claim. The El Paso telephone directory has a list of architects and yet there's no architecture in El Paso. Telling someone that what they claim is art isn't art gets too close to telling them, when they claim so, that they are not human beings. It's better to say that the art is bad

and why. Art could be defined by the intention to make art, but that's very hazy. The ultimate reason for not being able to define art is that, for the present, everything that manages to survive from the past becomes art. If the Etruscans made it, it's art. The art of our time, a thousand years from now, will be ceramic sinks and toilets, the only plentiful and unable objects. The ancient masters will be Kohler and American Standard, the latter obviously at the heart of American values.

To begin again at the beginning in a proper philosophical manner, one person is a unity, and some how, after the long complex process, a work of art is a similar unity. But the person is fairly unintelligible and the art is intelligible. Primarily what is intelligible is the nature of the artist, either of the past or now. The interests, thought and quality of the artist make the final total quality of the work. Incidentally, I could never consider my work as communication since I had no idea of with whom I was communicating. To consider a public at the beginning of your work is impossible, and almost later too. I made my work to be intelligible to me, with the casual assumption that if it made sense to me, it would to someone else. A person ordinarily lives in a chaos of a great diversity of ideas and assumptions, but does function after all as one in a natural way. A person is not a model of rationality, or even of irrationality, but lives, which is a very different matter. A person lives with a little solid knowledge, a great deal of fragmentary knowledge, a lot of assumptions and many provisional solutions and reactions made from day to day. Most people have some philosophical ideas. Almost none live by one of the grand systems, only by their fossil fragments. Neither is art at the present based on a grand system. The unity in art is the same kind of natural unity and is made similarly in the realization that knowledge is very uncertain and fragmentary. But as one lives with some assertion art can be made with a corresponding assertion and confidence. There's no other way. A person has a relationship to the natural world, more or usually less considered, to their family and friends, to the larger society, also usually little considered, and to the past, mostly unknown. All of this is unified in a work of art in a not very different way. Art is made as one lives. It must be as decisive as acts in life, hopefully more so, and is made despite the same acknowledged ignorance. But the assertions of art depend on more organization and attention than is usual in living. The force of it depends upon the long process. The construction, the development and the many decisions are necessary so that it be clear and strong[xbu2] .

If the unity of a work of art has the same nature as that of a person,

with some of the same diversity and also incompletion and the same effort to live nonetheless, art is not a special kind of experience or knowledge or, particularly, feeling. It is special in its development and not in its essential nature. Art is generally relegated to emotion and feeling, both considered inferior to thought. At best, as in the work of Benedetto Croce, it's placed too far into feeling. He calls the making and understanding of art "intuition," a less emotive word for him and better at the turn of the century and in Italian than it is here and now. But he also considers "intuition" cognitive in its way, which improves the word enormously. He is concerned, as everyone is, with the crucial distinction between art and science. Certainly art is not cognitive in the same way as science, to the benefit of both.

I've always considered the distinction between thought and feeling as at the least exaggerated; this is a small description that has been raised to a central fact of human nature. I tried to find the beginning of the idea but couldn't. Probably it was developed in early Christianity. I've always blamed it on the mind and body distinction of the Christians since it's handy for mysticism and their kind of belief. All experience, large and small, involves feeling; all thought involves feeling. All feeling is based on experience which involves thought. Emotion or feeling is simply a quick summation of experience, some of which is thought, necessarily quick so that we can act quickly. It's not irrational, virtually the opposite. Thought is not strict, isolated and only logical but is continually using its backlog of experience which is called feeling. **Otherwise we could never get from A to Z, barely to C, since B would have to be always rechecked.** It's a short life and a little speed is necessary. If the nature of art is the same as our nature and if there is no division between thought and feeling, art is cognitive just as our experience is. And art is no more inferior than is our experience as a whole.[xbu3]

I've always disliked the division between form and content and have never known what to answer when asked "but what is the content?", "what does it mean?" Recently it occurred to me that this unreal and uninformative division is just part of the larger division between thought and feeling. The division between form and content neither agrees with the very reciprocal process of developing art nor the viewer's experience in looking. It also has the same absurdities as the division between thought and feeling. Both halves are meaningless and without any function when considered alone. There is no form that can be form without meaning, quality and feeling. We even have a feeling about a rock, about anything. It's a contradiction to make a form that is meaningless. It's also impossible to express a feeling without a

form. It couldn't be said or seen. Embodiment is the central effort in art, the way it gets made, very much something out of nothing. Everything happens together and exists together and does not divide because of a meaningless dichotomy.

Or, if red has a quality or feeling by itself, and if later it's modified by an idea which also carries a feeling, how can it be stripped of the feelings to make pure form? How can a feeling be stripped of the red which produces it? How can and what would it be to us if the red were separated from its feeling, from the idea which modified it and that concomitant feeling? The division between form and content is not based on an understanding of art and is a falsification. It isn't even provisionally useful in discussion. It denies that art is not verbal and is still communication. The division demands a verbal kind of content which doesn't exist. This results in the claims and denials in art for all sorts of explicit obligations, notably moral and political. Some writers understandably defend form because of the perpetual demands for moral and political meaning. Most defend content. But it's a mistaken service to art to argue for pure form; it denies meaning to art. I was told once by a curator of the Guggenheim Museum, in arguing against the cancellation of an exhibition by an artist whose work was somewhat political, that it said in the charter of the museum that it could not show political art. I was offended since that meant that my work, acceptable as so called abstraction, had no political meaning. There is work in which the visual and the literary are differently emphasized and to me the more visual the better--but there is no pure form. And of course pure content doesn't exist. Much of philosophy is the rearrangement of what's given. Some categories such as form and content and thought and feeling seem not to be categories and elsewhere categories need to be made. The most general problem of this society, short of war and poverty, is that most activities and categories are together when they shouldn't be together and separate when they shouldn't be separate[XB4] ,

If you claim that art provides knowledge you risk placing it among metaphysics and religion, both destructive illusions. It is definitely not a kind of knowledge which supersedes science. Art, in its resemblance to us, is general, and science is particular, although science deals with the vast world. The knowledge of science is a specific kind achieved in its own way. Just as we cannot say much about the nature of the world without going through the process of science, art cannot say much either, since, in its integrity, there is no way that it can

incorporate the process of science. The only attitude in regard to science to be taken by contemporary art, is that the art should have appearances and implications which correspond to what is now known. Art cannot be ignorant. Negatively, the appearances and implications cannot violate what is known. At least art should not imply an incorrect factual statement. There's no way to know enough to make a precise true one; anyway, as I said, art cannot contain a scientific statement. Art is basically about our nature and our relationships and is only indirectly, through our ultimate relationship, that of existence, about the nature of the world. No artist through their work will ever tell you how far away Vega is. The distance of Vega affects art but art says nothing about Vega. But no scientist will ever tell you about Piero della Francesca, or that much about anyone. The distinction between scientific knowledge and artistic knowledge is very important. For 200 years or so art has been freeing itself from being obliged to say things about the world which are properly in the area of science. Some recent artists, Robert Smithson for one, have revived this dying anthropomorphism by incorporating scientific ideas and terms into their work. This is an anthropomorphic sentimentalism as gross as Landseer's dogs[XB5] .

My work has the appearance it has, wrongly called "objective" and "impersonal," because my first and largest interest is in my relation to the natural world, all of it, all the way out. **This interest includes my existence, a keen interest, the existence of everything and the space and time that is created by the existing things.** Art[XB6] emulates this creation or definition by also creating, on a small scale, space and time. Just what is known in art is too large a subject to discuss here, as is my use of certain words, our "nature" for example. Some aspects are implied in the questions discussed. The experience of coherence or unity is real knowledge. Most people need more coherence than they have, some desperately. The experience of another person is ordinarily difficult to gain and impossible if the person lived in the past. I could never have imagined someone imagining the shapes Matisse was so fond of. The experience or another time and society, which is tenuous since so little is known, can nevertheless, almost uniquely, be gained through art. The issue here is direct experience as opposed to an understanding gained from reading the work of good historians. Proportion is very important to us, both in our minds and lives and as objectified visually, since it is thought and feeling undivided, since it is unity and harmony, easy or difficult, and often peace and quiet. Proportion is specific and identifiable in art and architecture and creates our space and time. Proportion and in fact all intelligence in art is instantly understood, at least by some. It's a myth

that difficult art is difficult[XB7] .

However, it's better here to consider particular questions. I only want to add that you can't exaggerate the importance of proportion. It could almost be the definition of art and architecture. Originally I ignored proportion as a subject, although I knew that good art was intuitively well-proportioned, because the subject was associated with the Renaissance and the idea that proportion is a quality of God and Nature, a reality to be deduced or intuited by Man. The Classical Golden Section was a fact of Nature just as the electron is now. This wasn't credible to me, since proportion is obviously a quality of ourselves. The Golden Section seems unnecessarily fancy, perhaps because of the perpetual academic desire for arithmetical justification, but the fact is that we can see the simplest proportions, 1 to 2, 2 to 3, 3 to 4, and guess at more. 1 to 2 is just as particular, is not "has" as much its own quality, as red, or red and black, or black and white, or a material. Also there can be more than one 1 to 2 rectangles. These can comprise solids and volumes. The proportioned rectangles can make a coherent, intelligent space. They can make a credible, intelligent generality. They themselves are specific.

Art is simultaneously particular and general. This is a real dichotomy. The great thing about proportion, one aspect of art, is that it is both extremes at once. The level of quality of a work can usually be established by the extent of the polarity between its generality and particularity. Or, to state the idea a little too simply, the better the work the more diverse its aspects. The nature of the general aspects and the particular ones changes from artist to artist and especially from time to time, since the changes are due to broad changes in philosophy. This change is the essential change in art, determining its purpose and appearance. When the change is progress it reflects the increasing scientific knowledge and the improved values in society. And when the change is not progress, it reflects increasing ignorance and a decline, as in the late Hellenistic art and the subsequent early Christian art. In fact, now, art has been declining for fifteen years, following architecture which has already sunk into musical comedy. Many artists and a majority of architects and their clients are our internal barbarians, using Toynbee's term. A good building, such as the Kimbell Museum, looks the way a Greek temple in a new colony must have looked among the huts. It looks the way the Roman temple, now a church, looks among the ordinary medieval buildings or Assisi. The temple looks like civilization. The Kimbell is civilization in the waste land of Fort Worth and Dallas. The Seagram building is that in New York. These few good buildings are and represent advance and

enlightenment in as simple a way as any survey tells you the first buildings of the Renaissance did. We are starting a new era while suffering increasing mediocrity, a time in which even the ideas of quality and knowledge are disappearing. The integrity and authority of quality and knowledge are disappearing. The integrity and authority or all the arts and of education is being destroyed by the increasing mediocrity.

Anyway, in order to explain the polarity of generality and particularity, a little history is necessary. All European art from Giotto to Cezanne has as an essential particularity, the evocation of immediate emotion, what you feel right now about whoever or whatever is in front of you, about the immediate situation. This corresponds to the philosophy that you can deduce or intuit the realities of the world. If you don't believe you can do this, the complete nature of that art becomes irrelevant and wrong. Croce, incidentally, says belief is not part of art. But belief is central to art. After all, there hasn't been religious art for a long time; there isn't any communist art; the U.S. Government has no art. Grand philosophical systems and especially political ones are not credible anymore. Newman wrote: "We are making it [art] out of ourselves." **I believe in what I feel, know and experience and I follow the interests inherent in myself.** The better artists are original and obdurate; they're the gravel in the pea soup[XB8] .

In Jackson Pollock's painting the particularity, the immediacy, is the dripped paint, which remains dripped paint as a phenomenon, for all the beauty of the small shapes it makes. The generality is in the scale or proportion and in the larger shapes. It's in the appearance of chaos. The gesture or the motion shown in the application of the paint varies from painting to painting from the particular to a middling generality. The size and the color generally occur in the middle between particularity and generality. At the same time as Pollock and since, almost all first rate art has been based on an immediate phenomenon, for example, the work of Dan Flavin and Larry Bell. The necessity for this kind of immediacy is one reason three-dimensional art has been the most advanced for twenty years. Short of that the old attitudes continue. These produce some good art but never any that's first rate. For example, de Kooning is a good artist but the difference between his work and Pollock's is vast. His brushwork is not an immediate phenomenon but is only based on a scrambled representation, not basically different from Soutine's expressionism, which is not very different from the old picture undistorted. The emphasis on phenomena and specificity relates to empiricism[XB9] .

This is another large topic but there isn't enough time. This lecture has begun a slight aesthetics of my own; it's very much a beginning. There are many more questions to consider. I'll mention some. The idea of belief should be developed. Simplicity and complexity is interesting. The process of making art should be analyzed, as I said earlier. The function of "reason" is very interesting as it estimates, under stands and uses all that's known and felt, guessing sometimes, to finally help make a new kind of art. It's like a metalanguage. I remember little about John Dewey's book but have the impression that he stressed process. I need to read much more. I was recently given an English version of "Critica del Gusto" by Galvano della Volpe in which he criticizes the division between reason and feeling. I'm in the middle of Santayana's books, which I read long ago. And so on. Existence is a subject. The relation of art and architecture to the past is crucial, again, especially now, when historical styles are being so outrageously debased by the architects who build unnecessary skyscrapers. The question or the past very much connects to belief and to understanding exactly what it is you know. There is the old question of function in architecture and of suitability in art. My aphorism is not that form follows function but that it never violates it. Or common sense, for that matter. And there is the relationship, which doesn't exist now, between art and architecture.